



THE SILK ROAD COUNTRIES: CULTURAL UNITY IN DIVERSITY AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY

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Abstract: This paper studies and describes the commonalities that are to be found in the food habits, clothing, architectural styles in countries which were since ancient times connected to each-other via the Great Silk Road which was not only a trade route but a conduit of culture, religion, tradition and many such human concepts and values which bound these countries in to a Common Cultural Region even though they were and are very different culturally, linguistically, and in many other ways.

Keywords: Silk Road, Turkey, China, Central Asia, India.

Geoffrey M. Gluckman very aptly said about the world in his book “Deadly Exchange” –

**“One race, many cultures,
one place.”¹**

INTRODUCTION

The term “**Silk Road**” was coined in the 19th century by a German geographer and traveler, Ferdinand von Richthofen, but the actual road existed long before that. It became prominent during the Han Dynasty in China in around 2nd - 1st century B.C. But the term “**Silk Road**” is actually a very narrow term for this vast and glorious road. It is not even a single road that only dealt in silk trade. It is in fact a series of routes that crisscrossed through the landmasses of Earth touching at least three continents – Asia, Africa and Europe. Its existence started as a result of the knowledge gained by the Romans about a magical fabric created by the Chinese that could pass through a small opening like that of a ring on a

¹ Geoffrey M. Gluckman, Geoffrey M. Gluckman Quotes, n.d., [Goodreads](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/954222.Geoffrey_M_Gluckman), 16 December 2014

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man's finger and their strong desire to get a hold of this fabric. This 'magical fabric' was Silk. It is believed that Julius Caesar had silk curtains imported from China!²

Eventually this road went on to connect the West with the East. Though in history it is known as a trade route, it had much more significance than spreading trade. Almost all the major religions travelled via this historical road and spread to the Silk Road countries - Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism are to name a few. The Silk Road played a significant role in migration of populations from one country to another in ancient and medieval times and, as a result, it facilitated the inter-mingling and interactions between different populations that gave rise to a unique unified culture that has been called as a "**Common Silk Road Culture**" by Dr. Konuralp Ercilasun in his paper titled – "Silk Road as a Sub-Global Region: A Sphere Emerging from the Interaction of Cultural and Economic Fields".³

The term used by Dr. Ercilasun "**Common Silk Road Culture**" is an apt term to describe the commonalities in the cultures and customs of countries of Silk Road region, especially the Asian part of the Silk Road. In this part of the Silk Road the following countries are worth mentioning – China, without which the existence of Silk Road would probably not have been possible; the Central Asian countries majority of which now fall under the Commonwealth of Independent States (C.I.S.), because they were for long a part of the erstwhile USSR; these countries are – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan; India which was in ancient times well-known for its spices and Indian spices were the second largest trade item on the Silk Road for a long time (there is even a lesser-known term "spice route" for Silk Road); Persia which is the modern day Iran and Turkey. These are the countries that despite of having different religious backgrounds, different climatic conditions and different cultures and civilizations have a lot many things in common, especially in their architectural forms and motifs, their clothing, their food and their art and craft forms. This commonality was not achieved in one day or in a vacuum; it was a long continuous process which was going on since the ancient times and is still continuing today. Human nature is such that it is difficult not to pour emotions into whatever humans do. Hence, trade was not simply trade; it was not simply an economic or monetary exchange; it was also an exchange of emotions, an exchange of ideas, an exchange of cultures, and an exchange of stories that were popular in the countries that were involved in commercial relationships. It is believed that there used to be at least one rest-stop which was better known as a *caravansarai* (this term is a combination of two words – "*caravan*" and "*sarai*" – a Persian word which means "dwelling") at an interval of a day's journey on the Silk Road where traders and travelers used to take rest for the night after a long day's journey and at such *caravansarais* people of different cultures and religions used to meet and share their stories and experiences, maybe for the simple reason that they had nothing better to do at that time of night and each one of them wanted the others to know about his country; and as a result of these oral interactions the cultures of different lands spread. Not

² N.S. Gill, How did the Roman Empire acquire Silk and Silkworms, n.d., [About.com](http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/chinasilkroad/f/RomeSilk.htm), 16 December 2014
<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/chinasilkroad/f/RomeSilk.htm>

³ Dr. Konuralp Ercilasun, [Silk Road as a Sub-Global Region: A Sphere Emerging from the Interaction of Cultural and Economic Fields](http://www.centralasia-southcaucasus.com/docs/.../Paper_Kenuralp_Ercilasun) (2003), 25 July 2014,
www.centralasia-southcaucasus.com/docs/.../Paper_Kenuralp_Ercilasun

only this, they must have observed each-others' dressing styles, food habits and many more things and this curiosity led to more exploring of the unknown cultures and people.

The history of Silk Road is full of travelers that brought along with them certain aspects of their culture to foreign lands and took some of the customs and cultures of these foreign lands along with them to their respective countries. One of the first known travelers of the ancient Silk Road was Zhang Qian or Chang Chien, a commander of the then imperial army of China who volunteered to travel the treacherous Silk Road to reach Bactria. His journey was for military purposes and it lasted 13 years. He brought back with him to China first-hand information about history, geography and cultural conditions of the Central Asian countries and also about the regions beyond Central Asia like Persia, Arabia and the Roman Empire.⁴ Then there were other famous Chinese travelers like Fa-hsien (Faxian), the first Chinese monk to reach India on foot and return with knowledge of Buddhism; Hsuan-tsang (Xuan Zang) who was also a Chinese Buddhist monk who traveled to India via regions of Central Asian countries and crossed Hindu Kush and returned back with knowledge of Indian Sutras and spent rest of his life translating them in to Chinese.⁵ In medieval times, the most famous was Marco Polo, a 13th century Venetian traveler who journeyed through the Silk Road. His book *The Description of the World or The Travels of Marco Polo* was the first book that acquainted Europeans with the cultures of Central Asia and China. This book earned another name in his own country when it was published during his lifetime – *II Milione* (The Million Lies) because very few believed that he wrote the truth in his book. Most of them believed it was a work of fiction; but till his last breath Marco Polo kept insisting that he wrote whatever he himself witnessed. His book became famous after his death when lot more travelers travelled through Silk Road to those parts of the Earth that Marco Polo wrote about in his book.⁶ Then there was Ibn Battuta who was a 14th century Moroccan traveler of the Silk Road from African continent. Many more such travelers also existed. This proves the belief that culture and traditions of one country spread to another through these travelers and traders, through human contact and via the Silk Road.

If properly analyzed, there will be lot many things that could be found common in the Asian part of the Silk Road countries. This paper focuses on the commonalities or the similarities in the architectural styles, in the food items or cuisine and the clothing of the countries of Asian part of the Silk Road.

SIMILARITIES OF ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

The cultural unity in the Asian part of the Silk Road region is clearly visible especially in the architectural styles when one travels from Turkey to China via the Silk Road. In this belt fall countries like **Turkey, Iran** (Persia), **India**, Central Asian Countries – **Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan & Kazakhstan**, and **China**. This

⁴ Han Emperor Wu-ti's Interest in Central Asia and Chang Chien's Expeditions, Travelers on Silk Road, Silk Road Foundation, (1997-2000), 22 December 2014, <http://www.silk-road.com/artl/wuti.shtml>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Marco Polo and His Travels, The Silk Road Foundation, 22 December 2014, www.silk-road.com/artl/marcopolo.shtml

www.silk-road.com

common architectural style developed due to the influence of Islamic architecture which includes a dome-shaped roof, minarets and arabesque-type calligraphy in Arabic.⁷

The mosques and Jama Masjids/ Jama Mosques (the main mosque of a town) that are prevalent in all the above-mentioned countries look similar to each-other. One of the biggest examples would be that of Charminar and Chor Minor, the first one is in Hyderabad, India and the second is in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. They resemble each-other not only in architectural style but also in their names which are quite similar. Some other examples are – Hagia Sophia Mosque in Istanbul, Turkey; The Blue Mosque in Aran-Va-Bidgol, Iran; Asfi Mosque in Lucknow, India; Saparmurat Haji Mosque in Gokdepe, Turkmenistan; Grand Mosque in Dushanbe, Tajikistan; Bibi Khanym Mosque in Samarkand, Uzbekistan; The Blue Mosque in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan; Nur-Astana Mosque in Astana, Kazakhstan and Hui Mosque in Ningxia, China. If one looks at them, they all look very similar to each-other. Just by looking at them it is near impossible to tell which country each of them belongs to. Apart from the structural similarities, the arabesque calligraphies are also similar.

SIMILARITIES IN CUISINE

Silk Road was the medium of travel for a long time before there were any sea-routes discovered. People of different countries and even continents migrated to countries connected by this historical road and settled far from their places of origin, but they brought with themselves a part of their culture – their traditions and customs to feel at home. This included their food habits and their cuisine.

Mughals ruled over India for a long time and made India their home. Babur, who was the first Mughal to come to India in the 16th century A.D. and found the Mughal Dynasty, was actually a descendent of the great Mongol conqueror, Genghis Khan and also Turkic conqueror Tamerlane /Timur (*he was the 5th in male succession from Timur and 13th through the female line from Genghis Khan*).⁸ Hence, the Mughals were Chagatai-Turkic in origin from Central Asia. In India, they adopted Persian as their official language. This maybe one of the reasons the Mughlai cuisine is influenced by the Iranian as well as Central Asian cuisine. The cuisine of Central Asian countries, like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have lot in common in terms of the names of the dishes and the ingredients and the way they look and taste similar with cuisine of India (Mughlai cuisine), Persia/Iran(Iranian cuisine) and Turkey. There are some very good examples - one of them is the Uzbek *Samsa* and Indian *Samosa*. They not only sound similar, they have the same purpose – to be eaten as a snack with tea (incidentally, tea in Russia is known as *Chai* with the same pronunciation as in Hindi). Another one and probably more popular one is a special

⁷ Arabesque – Definition of Arabesque by Dictionary.com – *Fine Arts* A sinuous, spiraling, undulating or serpentine line or linear motif, 23 December 2014, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/arabesque>

⁸ T.G. Percival Spear, Babur, 31 August 2014, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 24 December 2014, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/47524/Babur>

rice-preparation called *Pulav/Pulao* in India. It is known as *Pilav* in Turkey; *Polo* in Iran (Persia), *Pilaf* in Kazakhstan; *Plov* in Turkmenistan; *Palav* in Tajikistan; *Palov* in Uzbekistan; *Paloo* in Kyrgyzstan; *Plov* in Azerbaijan. Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan have a vegetarian pulao called *Shirin Paloo* in Kyrgyzstan and *Shirin Plov* in Azerbaijan in which instead of meat there are dried fruits and raisins. There is a version of *Shirin Polo* in Iran as well, but it is sweet in taste. This rice dish not only sounds similar in these countries, it looks similar too. In China there is a similar rice dish that is known as *Fried Rice*. It is also a special preparation of rice with pieces of vegetables.

Then there is the similar type of bread preparation which in India is called *Tandoori Naan*. It is a type of bread that is prepared in a special clay oven called *Tandoor* in Iran and India. The same oven is called *Tandyr* in Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and so on. The similar looking bread is called *Naan* in Turkmenistan; *Tandyr Nan* in Kazakhstan; *Non* in Tajikistan, in Uzbekistan as well as in Iran. *Tandoor* baking is practiced by Uyghur people of China who are Turkic in origin and who had migrated to China somewhere in the 9th century A.D. They are mostly settled in Xinjiang Province of China. There is one more food item common to Central Asian countries and China, which are dumplings. These dumplings are called *Momo* in China; *Manti* in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan; *Menti* in Kazakhstan; *Mantu* in Kyrgyzstan. Apart from these, there are many more food items/dishes that have similar names and recipes.

SIMILARITIES IN CLOTHING

Clothing of any place tells a lot about its culture and traditions. It also depends on the climatic conditions and the living conditions of the people of a particular region. If one observes the clothing of the Asian part of the Silk Road region, it is very similar irrespective of the countries that the clothing belongs to. The clothing of this part of Silk Road region is very decorative and colourful with elaborate headgears. The clothing that is portrayed here look very similar to each-other. They look like relatives of the Indian dress *Salwar Kameez*. It is even believed that the Indian *Salwar Kameez*⁹ actually originated in Samarkand, Uzbekistan where the name for its women's as well as men's clothing is *Salwar Kameez*!¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Lucius Annaeus Seneca, a Roman philosopher, once said – “*As the soil, however rich it may be, cannot be productive without cultivation, so the mind without culture can never produce good fruit.*”¹¹

⁹ Definition of *Salwar Kameez* – “A type of suit, worn especially by Asian women, with loose trousers and a long shirt”, Cambridge Dictionaries Online, n.d., 26 December 2014, <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/salwar-kameez>

¹⁰ Gold Embroidery, Places to visit in Uzbekistan, [Visit Uzbekistan Travel](http://www.visituzbekistan.travel/sightseeing/uzbekistan-souvenirs/gold-embroidery/), n.d., 26 December 2014, <http://www.visituzbekistan.travel/sightseeing/uzbekistan-souvenirs/gold-embroidery/>

¹¹ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, Lucius Annaeus Seneca Quote, [Iz Quotes](http://izquotes.com/quote/362393), n.d., 28 December 2014, <http://izquotes.com/quote/362393>

The Silk Road played a major role in bringing countries and even continents closer to each-other and it can be said that in an era when the term “globalization” was not even thought of, Silk Road managed to bring global awareness in terms of cultural exchanges, at least to the countries and continents that it passed through. Silk Road created an avenue for inter-mingling of people of different cultural and religious backgrounds and made them more tolerant towards different cultures and religions. People became more aware of the different cultures and religions that existed around them and they explored further to find out more about these foreign cultures and people.

The relevance of these past cultural and religious exchanges in today’s world is the fact that the Silk Road helped culturally shaping a part of the world as it exists today, especially the Asian part of the Silk Road region and make people more tolerant and receptive to things that are foreign. The things that were found likeable or suitable to the people of a particular country were adopted and/or copied and in the course of time, these things adapted as per the country and its culture and eventually such a synthesis occurred that in today’s scenario it is near impossible to track the origin of a particular custom or tradition or which country was responsible for which custom or tradition. Every country on the Silk Road has a part of every other country of the Silk Road; a very good example is the flourishing of Buddhism in China and Tibet. Though Buddhism originated in India, it is no longer a major religion in India, but it is a major religion in China and Tibet. Incidentally, India is a very good example of acceptance of religions of other lands, like Christianity, Islam and Zoroastrianism which are now flourishing in India.

Religious tolerance and acceptance is very much needed in today’s world. Where Internet and fast means of transportation have brought the physical world closer, cultural and religious tolerance have brought people closer spiritually and emotionally, which is equally important for the world to be a balanced place.

The acceptances in terms of food/cuisine, clothing, architecture, religion and many other things over a long period of time have brought a strong underlying cohesive force that has created a new unified culture, new belief systems, a modern approach to look at things that are foreign/unknown, new society, which gave rise to a new Silk Road civilization in today's world. Silk Road has played a major role in creating a common understanding among the people of the East and the West, a great sense of underlying cultural unity, a sense of brotherhood that lives, works and grows together and gives respect to all the cultures and people and made the world a globalized platform which accepts and exchanges habits, ideas and customs and traditions openly and freely and moves forward with every passing second in the quest for human and societal evolution.

In the end I would like to close my paper with some quoted lines from an article by Richard Kurin titled – “The Silk Road: Connecting People and Cultures” in which he is talking about the significance of the Central Asian region of the Silk Road in today’s scenario:

“It is better to connect to the peoples and cultures around them and to participate in the commerce of nations than to withdraw from such interchange. By reclaiming the

heritage of the Silk Road, the region may, once again, play an important role in the cultural and economic life of the global community”¹²

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¹² Richard Kurin, The Silk Road: Connecting People and Cultures, Smithsonian Institution, 26th Smithsonian Folklore Festival, The Silk Road – Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust, n.d., 27 December 2014, www.festival.si.edu/past_festivals/silk_road/program_richard_kurin.aspx